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Participatory micro-regeneration: governing urban redevelopment in Qinghe, Beijing

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how far the Foucauldian concept of “governmentality” may offer valuable insights into new trends of participatory regeneration in urban China. Drawing on participatory micro-regeneration projects in Qinghe, Beijing, this research follows a governmentality approach. It explores how the Chinese state exercises new governmental technologies of community participation and self-governance to construct governable spaces and governable subjects. During the regeneration process, we identify multiple participatory practices where citizen power is exercised in decision-making and project implementation but guided by experts within the fields structured by the state. We argue that participation has been instrumentalized by the state to achieve extra-economic objectives of social governance and people-centred development. We also observe tensions and resistance during participatory micro-regeneration, leading to the failure to develop a self-governed community.

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Introduction

China’s urban (re)development has long been characterized as growth-oriented (He & Wu, 2009; T. Zhang, 2002). This process has significantly reshaped the inter-relationship between the state and its people through the production and consumption of urban spaces (He & Lin, 2015). A market society has gradually been established, where societal relations are reorganized through market discipline, a consumerist mindset and an increasing sense of self (Y. Liu & Yau, 2020; Wu, 2008). Despite the long tradition of an interventionist state which remains largely in place, recent research has shown the “implementation of agency by ordinary residents’ (M. Zhang et al., 2018, p. 1,542) who are “actively adapting, strategising and manipulating the conditions of their lives’ (Logan, 2018, p. 1,376). Some work through informal approaches to adapt to state policies (X. Wang et al., 2019; M. Zhang et al., 2018). Others take more contentious measures to challenge state programs, such as in cases of right-defending activities (Cai et al., 2021; Fu, 2015; Yip, 2019).

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To alleviate rising levels of social tension, the Chinese state has explored new models of development beyond growth (Wu et al., 2022), such as “people-centered development” (Y. Li & Zhong, 2021; Z. Li, 2022). The emphasis on the role of “people” is demonstrated by a recent rise in participation in urban (re)development and governance. Here we work with a broadly defined concept of “participation”. We build on Heberer’s (2009) conceptualization of political and social participation and expand it to include all types of activities that establish vertical links between individuals and the wider community.

A new trend of participation has been observed, showing that the governance of China’s urban redevelopment has included more soft, flexible, and non-coercive approaches (e.g. Wong et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020). So long as state power remains the overriding priority of redevelopment, as Wu (2018) argues, the new attempts to guide participation would create openings for the rise of societal forces, such as community groups. This is confirmed by Verdini (2015), who presents the rise of community groups in multiple regeneration projects. Others, however, remain critical when evaluating the role of participation in large-scale urban redevelopment. Xu and Lin (2019) examine Shanghai’s housing requisition and criticize its participation as being a “superficial and symbolic” (p. 771) attempt that merely benefits the local government. Wei (2022) argues that the government misuses participation to justify its official agenda, and relocated residents are neither better empowered nor compensated. Similarly, Chen et al. (2020) emphasize the sustained marginality of ordinary residents, regardless of their tactics to negotiate with the state through participation.

More recently, participation has gained new prominence in new practices of urban redevelopment, namely incremental or micro-regeneration. According to the State Council (2020), a micro-regeneration project features small-scale, slow-paced, less intrusive and *in situ* renovation without large-scale demolition and relocation. Neither land profit nor relocation-induced social resistance is the main concern of micro-regeneration (M. Wang et al. 2022a, 2022b). Instead, recent observations suggest that micro-regeneration projects often draw on collaborative efforts from state and non-state actors, especially direct participation from property owners such as residents (Jiang et al., 2020; S. Li et al., 2022). Micro-regeneration provides a new window to examine questions of participation in urban China: what are the new features of participation in micro-regeneration as a new wave of urban redevelopment in China? How do residents participate and why? Does participatory micro-regeneration reflect new possibilities to negotiate the relationship between the state and its people in the so-called “people-centered development”?

To answer these questions, we interpret the politics of participation through the lens of governmentality (Foucault, 2007). It provides a macro-level perspective for analyzing governance changes, focusing on the reconfiguration of governmental practices, strategies, and technologies, while also highlighting the responses of those governed to these changes (i.e. the process of subjectivation). Through the lens of governmentality, we explore participatory practices unfolded in the state-funded governance experiment – the New Qinghe Experiment. We scrutinize diverse approaches in which state power is exercised to guide the practice of individuals in the production and maintenance of community public spaces in Qinghe. We also examine multiple tactics developed by individuals to internalize or challenge governmental power from the state and form their own subjectivity. This opens new fields for discussions of the rise of participation in the

Chinese context and reflects more generally on state-centered theories of urbanism. While existing researchers have widely used urban or state entrepreneurialism as a mid-level analytical framing to understand China's governance changes (e.g. Y. Liu & Yau, 2020; Wu, 2018, 2023), we argue that a macro-level governmentality perspective strengthens and expands such understanding. It addresses not only analytical questions of what the governance changes are, but further reflects on why such changes come into the first place in new practices of micro-regeneration and make sense to the new model of "people-centered development". Specifically, state entrepreneurialism, derived from a grounded examination of the Chinese political economy, involves governmental practices that constitute a specific mode of governmentality. Its interactions with other modes of governmentality co-produce a nuanced picture of how participation plays out on the ground.

Our analysis took place over two periods, between February and April 2022 (online due to COVID restrictions) and between April and June 2023 (in Qinghe). Data was collected from 21 semi-structured interviews with key informants (including scholars, community planners, social workers and volunteers involved in the regeneration, and residents from case neighborhoods); two focus groups with volunteers and community planners; participatory observations of two community garden-themed events in case neighborhoods, and non-participatory observations near selected community public spaces, during afternoon and evening times when the use of such venues are supposed to be high. This was complemented by data from secondary sources, such as news reports, policy documents, and social media. Most questions asked during interviews and focus groups were open-ended, aiming to touch on key issues related to details of the regeneration and perceptions and valuations of neighborhood spaces before and after regeneration. With data from multiple sources, we were able to triangulate the findings and develop a comprehensive understanding of how the interplay between state power and community/self-power is crystalized in the wax and wane of Qinghe's participatory micro-regeneration.

In the remainder of this paper, we review the literature on community participation and develop a mid-level analytical framework through the lens of governmentality, focusing on two interrelated aspects, namely spatiality and subjectivity. Along the two lines, we then provide an in-depth analysis of participatory micro-regeneration in Qinghe. We detail interactions between state and community actors and the spatial and social changes they bring. We conclude by summarizing the key findings and implications of this research.

The politics of participation through the lens of governmentality

The Foucauldian concept of governmentality facilitates our understanding of changing state-society relationship as manifested through spatial projects such as regeneration. The concept describes calculated means to structure the "field of possible action" of individuals, or "conduct of conduct" (Foucault, 2007). The process of governing becomes an open strategic game that involves both power over others (subjectification), and power through oneself (subjectivation) (Cruikshank, 1993; Rose, 1996).

The governmentality approach expands the discussion of the state-society relationship from a focus on "what" questions to a focus on "how" questions. It argues against a

prefabricated and stable state, and highlights the state as a dynamic and contingent condensation of societal power relations (Foucault, 2007). The so-called “state retreat” or “state return” are concerned less with changes in state sovereignty, but more with a transformation in statehood, or a different “art of government” (Lemke, 2015). Likewise, new forms of participation shall be viewed as a reconfiguration of governmental technologies, which do not necessarily lead to empowered citizens and the rise of civil society (Blakeley, 2010). The key to understanding the dynamics of the state, as Foucault (2007) emphasizes, is to analyse relations of power from governmental practices, strategies and technologies.

Recent discussions of governmental technologies revolve mostly around the neoliberal governmentality (Mai et al., 2023; Rosol, 2019; J. Wang & Li, 2017). The neoliberal “conduct of conduct” aims to create social conditions conducive to the neoliberal subjectivity, characterized by “a free and autonomous “atom” of self-interest” (Hamann, 2009, p. 38). However, one shall be aware that neoliberal governmentality is just one among many modes of governmentality. Other modes include, for instance, the governmentality of the welfare state that draws on Keynesian interventions (Bevir, 2011), the authoritarian governmentality that works through obedience rather than autonomy (Dean, 2010), and the socialist governmentality that is deeply rooted in the Marxist-Leninist strong belief in objective truth, techno-scientific reasoning, and administrative rationality (Jeffreys & Sigley, 2009). Acknowledging multiple possible governmental rationalities and technologies enables us to better comprehend governance changes: it is not just a question of the retreat or the return of the state, but more precisely a question of the retreat or the return of *which* state (e.g. a welfare state, an entrepreneurial state or an authoritarian state).

The governmentality of community participation in urban China

The neoliberal governmentality approach has made its way to urban China in recent years. A good demonstration is the rise of the “people-centered” (*yiren weiben*) and “self-government” (*zizhi*) rhetoric in governmental discourses. This suggests that the autonomous “self,” instead of the “mass,” has become a new target of governmental interventions that work increasingly “from afar” to “steer” social development (Heberer & Göbel, 2011; Ong & Zhang, 2008). A growing number of scholars have explored how this autonomous “self” plays out in urban communities. For instance, Bray (2006) argues that the national community building (*shequ jianshe*) campaign reflects neoliberal governing rationality that seeks to cultivate morally responsible citizens who can manage their own affairs in response to the reform of the socialist work unit. When these self-made citizens buy into privatized residential communities (*xiaoqu*), as he (2008) argues, they form self-governing communities through which the state exercises disciplinary power indirectly. Similar views are held by Tomba (2014), who interprets the formation of a new “property class” in private neighborhoods as the product of the state’s social engineering strategy. This mechanism of “governing through community” is further demonstrated by the rise of neighborhood self-governing organizations, i.e. the homeowners’ association (HOA). HOAs are found to enjoy varying degrees of autonomy and participation in HOA activities demonstrates residents’ awareness of property rights and intention to gain better control over the community collective consumption (Fu & Lin, 2014; He, 2015; Read, 2008). Nevertheless, recent research suggests that the HOA is

not a genuine form of “private governance” (Lu et al., 2019); instead, it enables the state to sustain and extend its governmental power into everyday life by cultivating clientelist ties with participants (Cai & He, 2022).

Furthermore, scholars highlight the authoritarian and post-socialist context in which autonomous selfhood and self-governing communities are being (re-)invented (Palmer & Winiger, 2019; Sigley, 2006). Legacies of the socialist state have been widely observed, such as the pastoral relationship between local party leaders and obedient citizens (Lin & Kuo, 2013) and the micro-governing strategies that work through strengthened paternalistic practices, direct state intervention and bureaucratic supervision (Tomba, 2014). Community participation, in this sense, is a continuation of the socialist regime. It draws on personal relationships and daily contacts between “powerful” loyalist-activists who share close relationships with grassroots state agencies (Guo & Sun, 2014; Read, 2003), and “collaborative” citizens cultivated via a combination of capacity training, Maoist mobilization, and Confucian discourses (Wan, 2016).

As such, scholars have presented the co-existence of neoliberal and socialist governmentalities in post-reform China. Here, Tomba’s (2014) work is illuminating. He proposes the concept of “social clustering” (p. 29) to delineate “comfort zones” for each governmentality respectively: neoliberal governmental technologies are exercised by the state in gated communities where residents are perceived as “high quality” and able to govern themselves; and socialist governmental technologies suit communities where residents lack sufficient skills and resources to self-govern. However, his analysis tends to reduce the politics of everyday life to the operation of state power over different groups of citizens or in different types of neighborhoods. It fails short to adequately explain why tailor-made state programs fail to reach intended goals. This is demonstrated by the rise of housing activism (Cai et al., 2021; Fu, 2015; Yip, 2019), showing the social challenges faced by the state when exercising neoliberal governmentality. It is also demonstrated by the indifferent attitudes of residents towards community participation organized in an authoritarian communitarian fashion (Heberer & Göbel, 2011).

As Wan (2016) rightly points out, the over-simplification of the “social clustering” framework is associated with an underestimation of the process of subjectivation, marginalizing citizens’ (re)actions towards state programs and silencing their struggles. The issue of subjectivity figures prominently in the research on community participation because the state – even in an authoritarian form – is becoming increasingly difficult to force people to participate; rather, it guides people to participate through “conduct of conduct”. To address this gap, we develop a mid-level analytical framework in the next section to unpack the dynamic relationships between state power and subjectivity, as manifested through broadly-defined neighborhood spatial projects, such as community gardens.

A mid-level analytical framework: state, self and space

While studies into governmentality bring critical insights into the discussion of the changing nature of state power, Foucault’s (1977) analytics of power is also closely associated with the use of the space. This enables us to develop a mid-level analytical framework that unpacks the process of participatory regeneration through the lens of governmentality. This framework revolves around two interrelated themes: spatiality (participatory

regeneration as a process of place-making) and subjectivity (participatory regeneration as a process of subject formation). “State” is implicitly embedded in the framework since both place-making and subject-formation are organized around or against the state.

The (re-)organization of space has been well recognized as a vital governmental technology to guide decisions and conduct of individuals for specific objectives. On the one hand, new subjects are formed during the re-organization of space. This is demonstrated by the recent observation of insurgent participation in radical protests and lifestyle activism against entrepreneurial urban redevelopment (e.g. Hilbrandt, 2017; Legacy, 2017; MacGregor, 2021). Emerging from these contentious attempts are political subjectivities that challenge the consensualised framing of urban regeneration produced by market actors and local state entrepreneurs. Subjectivation also takes place in small-scale neighborhood projects even if their spatial effects remain limited. Their “transformative potential”, as Bach and McClintock (2021) present in their observation of Montreal’s DIY garden projects, lies in “their functioning as spaces of political subject formation” where “participants articulate collective identities, mobilizing anti-capitalist visions and practising autogestion” (p. 873). In addition, political subjectivities can also be produced through civic education in which the state plays an enabling role. The new subjectivities are often co-opted by the state or collaborate with the state in a co-production mode (Crossan et al., 2016).

On the other hand, subjective power also has the potential to reshape space as a social product (Drake, 2014). Recent research on community volunteer subjectivity is illustrative. Volunteering has been widely promoted as a cost-effective approach for neighborhood upgrading through transforming vacant lots into various types of space, such as community educational, recreational or green space. Many believe that this voluntary production of neighborhood space is neoliberal and pro-state, because it frees the state from responsibilities for public service and neighborhood infrastructure (Barron, 2017; Rosol, 2012). Neighborhood space produced by volunteers and “responsible self” become “spaces of neoliberal governmentality” where “individuals [are] in charge of their own adjustment(s) to economic restructuring and social dislocation through self-help technologies” (Pudup, 2008, p. 1229). In other words, volunteer labor, or the power of responsibilised citizens in general, represents a new way of producing and governing community space through voluntary subjectivity, in which state power has not diminished but transformed (Rosol, 2012).

Notably, the mutually constitutive relationship between spatiality and subjectivity is not static, but subject to specific governmentalities at play. Community gardening, for instance, has been interpreted as a contested process, with “a form of actually existing neo-liberalism and a simultaneous radical counter-movement arising in dialectical tension” (McClintock, 2014, p. 148). Barron (2017) further unpacks this contested process and identifies multiple subjectivities, including entrepreneur, consumer and volunteer subjectivities that are pro-neoliberalism and producer, citizen and activist subjectivities that counter neoliberalism. This discussion can be further expanded beyond the debate of “neoliberalism or not” since neoliberal governmentality is just one among many modes of governmentality. Therefore, subjectivity and its dynamic relationship with spatiality are contingent products of negotiations between multiple governmentalities, which necessitates contextualized and historicized analysis of specific projects with more focus on tensions, contradictions and hybridities.

In subsequent sections, we draw on the mutually constitutive relationship between spatiality and subjectivity to examine state-society relations as embodied in the experiment of participatory micro-regeneration in Qinghe.

Micro-regeneration in Qinghe

Qinghe has become a test bed for China's recent social governance innovations. By integrating the "social" into the ultimate goal of governance, the Chinese state attempts to mitigate tensions between freedom for participation and leadership of the Party, a step further to the "people-centered" discourse (Jeffreys & Sigley, 2009; Snape, 2019). The ultimate goal, as envisioned by President Xi Jinping (2017), is to build a "community of social governance" (*shehui zhili gongtongti*), where the "social" is not only the object but also the subject of "governing."

The "New Qinghe Experiment" (NQE) is an experimental project to explore innovative approaches that localize national political mandate and translate "social governance" from political rationality into programs of action. Qinghe is located in northwest Beijing, and the region has experienced rapid transformation since the 1990s, with a large influx of rural-to-urban migrants, a profound restructuring of local industries (from state-owned enterprises in the textile industry to enterprises in science and technology), and a quick expansion of the urban landscape (mainly privately managed residential neighborhoods). Launched in 2014, the NQE is an experimental project funded by the Haidian district government and led by local scholars and planning professionals. The NQE consists of two programs. The first program, called the "social reorganization experiment," sets up a new grassroots institution – Deliberative Council (DC). It is designed to be a special council within the Residents' Committee, consisting of residents' representatives directly elected by residents and tasked with deliberation, agenda-setting, and decision-making. The second program is called the "community improvement experiment," covering all items on top of the agenda set by the DCs. It was further expanded into three sub-experiments, focusing on property management, public service, and micro-regeneration, respectively (J. Liu, 2020).

The experiment in micro-regeneration is considered one of the most significant components of the NQE. Local planning experts endorse a co-production approach to construct new urban landscapes and new subjectivities (i.e. community self-governance, *shequ zizhuxing*). Participatory micro-regeneration is identified as a vital tool for co-production. As we will show in the next section, many participatory activities were organized before, during, and after Qinghe's regeneration. These participatory attempts were further institutionalized into a community planner system in 2018, consisting mainly of planning professionals and social workers with rich local knowledge.

In the following sections, we present how participatory micro-regeneration plays out in Qinghe, drawing on two projects: community garden regeneration in Neighborhood M and community farm regeneration in Neighborhood Z.¹ Sampled neighborhoods/projects were carefully selected from the NQE. They generally represent the NQE, showing how state-funded participatory micro-regeneration works out and involves constant engagement from residents throughout the whole process of regeneration, including decision-making, collective design and co-production. Each case also has some distinctive characteristics regarding neighborhood history, housing tenure, social composition

and potential of self-governance, demonstrating social complexity and diversity on the ground. The community garden regeneration was a small-scale project in a privatized work unit (Neighborhood M) that was once affiliated with the largest state-owned enterprise (SOE) in the textile industry in Beijing. Most of its long-term residents used to work for the SOE but have now been laid off or retired. This project drew on the collaborative efforts of planning professionals, volunteers, and residents, and the latter group played crucial roles in the maintenance of the garden. The community farm regeneration was organized in an affordable housing estate (Neighborhood Z). The properties were partly allocated to landless farmers and partly sold at discounted prices to employees of local universities. It was also a small-scale project, the direction of which was significantly influenced by divergent voices of residents. Notably, the two cases are not presented in a strictly comparative way. They are all viewed as prototypical cases (Brenner, 2003) which deserve attention for their experimental attempts that reflect new directions of participatory regeneration. In the following section, we trace the process of participatory micro-regeneration in sampled neighborhoods by detailing how regeneration was initiated and how regeneration plans were formulated and implemented. We unpack the process of participatory micro-regeneration along the two lines: place-making and subject-formation.

Re-making community public spaces through participation: a governance experiment

Qinghe's participatory micro-regeneration projects sought to reproduce community public spaces through state-funded participatory programs. They are at odds with bottom-up regeneration attempts that work mostly through radical and contested approaches, such as tactic urbanism or guerrilla gardening (Bach & McClintock, 2021; Crossan et al., 2016). However, they do not map either onto China's traditional modes of regeneration rooted in the growth-oriented development model and organized in a top-down manner (Wei, 2022; Xu & Lin, 2019). Instead, Qinghe's participatory micro-regeneration was initiated as a joint endeavor between Residents' Committees, local NGOs, community planners and residents, and opened up new fields for social engagement.

To initiate participatory micro-regeneration, the community planning team, working together with Residents' Committees and local NGOs, established multiple communication channels between local government and residents, such as surveys, consultations, focus groups and online forums. These "invited spaces" were "actively attended" by participants who expressed their views and discussed with neighbors what they wished to achieve through the regeneration (a local resident interviewed, 14 April 2022). Opinions, suggestions and comments from residents were collected and summarized into proposals. They were then discussed at DC meetings, and included in the list of community improvements if received a sufficiently high number of votes from residents' representatives.

A new platform for community participation and decision-making was established through this experimental process of public consultation and deliberation. On this platform, ordinary residents were provided with chances to voice out their true demands. This differs both from participation organized in an authoritarian communitarian

fashion (Heberer & Göbel, 2011; Wan, 2016) and participation emerge directly from struggles or resistance against the existing neighborhood order (Cai et al., 2021; Fu, 2015; Yip, 2019). Instead, Qinghe's participatory regeneration worked out as a proactive governance strategy that sought to materialize the ideas of "social governance innovation" and "people-centered development". In the case of neighborhoods, key decisions regarding where to regenerate and for whom reflect, at least partly, local residents' demands and aspirations for an improved living environment. For instance, the community garden in Neighborhood M used to be an abandoned area dotted with rubbish, dog waste, and plant boxes left by a small group of residents who claimed part of the garden for personal use. The misuse of the communal area generated perpetual complaints from residents (a social worker interviewed, 23 April 2022). Therefore, it was not surprising that the plan to rebuild a "proper" community garden was well-received by residents' representatives. The plan was passed with a very high approval rate at the DC meeting, and prioritized for implementation.

However, these participatory attempts did not fully translate into a neoliberal form of self-government where the state governs from a distance. In Qinghe, we find a more visible and proactive role of the state. This is largely due to the experimental nature of participatory micro-regeneration. Echoing Lauermaann's (2018) general comments on experimental governance, we find that both objectives and evaluation criteria of participatory micro-regeneration were defined by the state that initiated the experiment, as demonstrated by the interview with a community planner in Neighborhood M:

Even though this is an experiment, the [Qinghe] Street Office would like to see some explicit yields because they are under performance pressure, or in other words, triggered by *KPIs*. We [community planners] are thus required to complete one demonstration project each year and most demonstration projects are predefined. (A community planner interviewed, 23 April 2022).

As the interview suggests, participatory micro-regeneration was designed by the district government as a governance experiment, and its implementation was perceived by local government officials as an administrative task. Whether the task succeeds or fails is determined less by levels of participation (perceived as an implicit outcome) but more by the timely completion of regeneration projects (perceived as an explicit outcome). This created tensions between participation – as the goal of the experiment, and regeneration – as the key to implementation.

To address the tensions, grassroots state agencies played a more active role beyond a "rule-maker". They proactively engaged in participatory regeneration by proposing projects that are perceived as "easy to complete", "having a high visibility (*xianshidu*)", and more importantly, "free from public controversy" (a planning scholar interviewed, 9 February 2022). As a consequence, the agenda of participatory regeneration, while literally set by residents' representatives at the DC meetings, was influenced, or even manipulated, by the local state. For instance, in Neighborhood Z, the regeneration project is located on a blighted vacant lot. It was purposefully selected by the Residents' Committee because the lot is at a considerable distance from surrounding residential buildings and has no conflicts over land use. The regeneration of the lot, as the leader of the Residents' Committee perceived, was "less likely to provoke social conflicts" (a planning scholar interviewed, 9 February 2022).

More importantly, through proposing projects for regeneration, grassroots state agencies attempted to structure the field of community participation. Our observation suggests that residents and their representatives partook in formal processes of consultation, deliberation, and decision-making; nevertheless, they were directed to discuss and approve proposals put forward by grassroots state agencies. Such “direction” did not work through coercive means or via traditional loyalist-activist networks (c.f. authoritarian governmental techniques). Instead, the local state guided residents’ behaviors through non-coercive approaches, such as mobilization and persuasion. At a DC meeting in Neighborhood Z, for instance, residents’ representatives discussed multiple neighborhood issues of broad concerns, such as parking management, community canteen and the general upgrading of neighborhood infrastructure, but they were encouraged to prioritize the plan put forward by the Residents’ Committee because “one shall start with simpler projects first” (a local resident interviewed, 18 May 2023). Community participation thus becomes a governmental technique that transforms democratic deliberation into a partly preordained process which ultimately legitimizes the objectives of the state. Other plans and proposals were not discarded but deprioritized or put on hold. This, as we will elaborate on in section 4, caused some residents to question the state-proposed regeneration project, particularly when it ran into trouble.

Participation, subjectivation and the roles of experts

The idea of “participation” was further consolidated in the design and implementation of regeneration projects. In the case neighborhoods, residents were mobilized to co-design and co-produce community public spaces with community planners. These experts guided community participation, facilitated civic education and took a leading role in co-production, which all contributed to the formation of a self-managing community. The state stepped back in this stage. Grassroots state agencies played supportive roles, described by one interviewee as “setting the scene” (a community planner interviewed, 18 May 2023). Their intention of “social governance innovation” was translated into practices through “technologies of expertise”.

In the design stage, community planners organized a series of focus groups and consultation meetings, encouraging residents to provide feedback on the regeneration plan drafted by planning professionals, or propose their own plans. For instance, in Neighborhood Z, the initial plan intended to fill the community farm with flowering plants. While this “urban-oriented” and “biodiversity-focused” plan satisfied some residents, it received objections from another group who preferred “the joy of farming” (a social worker interviewed, 4 April 2022). It asked for more spaces for growing vegetables. Considering all feedback, as the social worker recalled,

Multiple amendments were made. The plan went back and forth many, many times ... It would only work when the true demands of all parties are identified and considered.

Rather than rhetorically adopted, consultation and focus groups made a real difference in this case (c.f. M. Wang et al., 2022a). They were not symbolic or superficial practices but incorporated citizen voices into regeneration plans. It should be noted that these voices did not fundamentally challenge the givens of regeneration. They brought modifications to, rather than a subversion of, the state’s regeneration intentions.

In another case, no plans were pre-defined by community planners and all participating residents were invited to co-design the garden together. Community planners organized a series of workshops to share basic design knowledge with participants and help them build their own community garden models. The workshops enabled participants to connect everyday neighborhood experiences to concrete renovation practices and, as one planning professional comments, become the “true subject” of space production (a planning scholar interviewed, 9 Feb 2022).

Participation extended further into the co-production process. In Neighborhood M, for instance, community planners organized four open-day events to co-build the community garden with residents. However, on the first day, the event was only attended by members who were not part of the neighborhood, including community planners and external volunteers mobilized by wide environmental concerns. Most residents remained indifferent to the project, with a few being confused or sceptical. A consultant of the community planner team had a direct impact on trust-building. “He’s very charismatic, knowledgeable and humorous,” one resident recalled, “he started slowly with an easy-to-understand approach” (a local resident interviewed, 24 April 2022). This approach gradually stimulated the general interest of residents, together with a growing sense of community responsibility. Some residents were attracted when walking past the project site, with a few stayed and joined co-production. Such a behavioral change, as commented by a resident interviewed, shall be attributed to the voluntary nature of community planners. “They are not from our community, yet still working for us voluntarily”, as she further explained, “this is not easy. I shall lend a hand too” (a local resident interviewed, 26 May 2023). On the final open day, more than one-third of the people working on the project were residents. They were involved in making decisions for micro-details, such as the position and height of the log edging, and realizing these decisions, such as planting seeds and installing garden edging.

These practices triggered a process of subjectivation. Residents acquired knowledge and skills about how to design, organize and manage neglected community spaces, as well as how to collaborate with others holding different opinions (a social worker interviewed, 23 May 2023). They were transformed through co-design and co-production into governable and actionable residents who were actively involved in the collective process of place-making.

Moreover, in Neighborhood M, a group of residents spontaneously formed a volunteer team to take care of the garden after regeneration. They established a set of management rules and uploaded everyday working memos online, sharing stories of the garden with the whole community. The emergence of voluntary power transformed community gardening from a guided practice to a practice of self-government. The transformation demonstrated that citizen agency was, at least partly, generated during participatory regeneration. “Responsible self” and “responsible communities” were activated to make decisions for their own lives and manage their shared spaces.

The voluntary management of community public spaces shall be interpreted with caution. Further analysis reveals tensions embodied in the “volunteer subjectivity” that emerged from the NQE. First, although their emphasis on self-management works in ways similar to community autogestion observed in radical gardening activities (Bach & McClintock, 2021), volunteer teams in Qinghe conveyed no radical intentions. They neither reclaimed the land from the state nor exercised civic control over it. Their

collective actions to manage community public spaces are far from a radical form of grassroots urbanism that counters state-centrism. Instead, we find that most volunteers interviewed were in favor of the state's plan of micro-regeneration. In this sense, we echo Pudup (2008) and Rosol (2012) in a way that views volunteer subjectivity as a specific form of actually existing neoliberal subjectivity. It calls for individual responsibility and community engagement “not so much in the “absence” of the state” or against the state (Pudup, 2008, p. 1230).

Second, regardless of the neoliberal governing techniques employed, the primary aim of the NQE to invigorate voluntary engagement is not compensating for cutbacks to government spending in community services. This differs from observations in the Global North where some communities suffer from the retreat of the welfare state (Pudup, 2008; Rosol, 2012). Instead, community participation and volunteerism are critical components of the state-funded governance experiment in Qinghe. In other words, the voluntary management of community public spaces would not have become possible without the investment from the local government to regenerate such spaces. The development of community volunteering in Qinghe, as we will present in the next section, also requires input from the state.

Third, despite its inherent link to the state, community volunteering was not organized through the command and control system (c.f. authoritarian governmentality). Nor did it act in ways similar to the loyalist-activist system in socialist work units (c.f. socialist governmentality). Our observations in Qinghe suggest that community participation and volunteering were self-organized in a loose and flexible manner. While adhering to management rules, whether, when and how one committed time and energy to maintain community spaces became a personal choice, without incentives for participation or punishment for no-shows or wrongdoings.

Also worth noting is the role of experts in the process of subjectivation. They facilitated subject formation through organizing civic education and co-production activities. They also acted as role models when residents were less motivated about participation. During the same process, they implicitly instilled their design and aesthetics principles in the participants, such as “biodiversity” and “sustainability” (a community planner interviewed, 18 May 2023). The experts also internalized the objectives of the state. Our observations suggest that residents' general levels of support for state-proposed regeneration projects increased after the co-production. The technology of expertise thus became a less overt governing strategy of the state to cultivate self-actualising subjects and repudiate alternative imaginations of the community (Rose, 1996).

Community public spaces after micro-regeneration: short-term success, long-term dilemma

Micro-regeneration brought new looks to the case neighborhoods. For instance, in Neighborhood M, the community garden was completely changed after the open-day events, with all rubbish cleaned, new seeds planted, new footpaths delineated, and a new activity space organized. A series of follow-up activities were organized, such as movie nights and community parties, transforming the community garden into a new space of encounters. Residents were brought together in activities in and around

community public spaces, with improved micro-moral relations and an increased sense of community (a local resident interviewed, 24 April 2022).

The micro-regeneration projects were also perceived as a big achievement for the local government. Qinghe was promoted by the Beijing Municipal Government as a new model for “green place-making” which is “low in economic cost” and “high in social participation”.² Furthermore, the community garden project was awarded by the International Federation of Landscape Architects as one of the best social and community health projects in 2020.³

However, when we revisited the case neighborhoods four years after project completion, we found a post-regeneration predicament, characterized by contestation over community public spaces and struggles over the volunteer subjectivity. In this section, we investigate this predicament, discussing how state objectives of governing through participation and self-management, which appeared to be successful in the short term, were challenged and contested in the relatively long term.

Contestation over community public spaces

Positive changes brought by micro-regeneration were by no means permanent. Community public spaces kept evolving after the regeneration, with new tensions emerging. This is true for both co-production projects, where we find new struggles over land use that turned community public spaces into contested spaces after regeneration.

In Neighborhood M, the community garden was reconstructed and finally transformed into a messy place. Apart from a small area that was self-claimed by a resident to grow peonies, most parts of the garden were left unmanaged and gradually being covered by overgrown vegetation. One resident described how such changes took place.

It [the garden] was very successful in the short term [...], but by now, it is kind of an “unfinished” (*lanwei*) project [...] Summer (2019) was good, and autumn was fine. But in the winter, the garden was lack of maintenance, and all flowers withered. When it came to the following spring (2020), weeds flourished [...] The garden is now covered with so many overgrown plants that no one can ever step in. (A local resident interviewed, 24 April, 2022).

Almost all residents interviewed were dissatisfied with the deterioration. Many attributed it mainly to the way the garden was designed and managed. The design principles endorsed by experts, such as biodiversity and sustainability, were poorly received and even criticized by residents, especially after the garden started to fail. A couple of residents expressed similar views, such as “we don’t need this kind of biodiversity with plants that easily attract spiders and mosquitoes, and grow wildly right after the rain” (local residents interviewed, 26 May 2023). Likewise, quite a few complained about the garden paths designed according to “sustainable principles’, which became “too muddy in rainy days’. This brings to the fore the tension between expert decisions and popular demands as politics of landscape, insects and plants unfold in the design and management of community gardens.

A different story happened in Neighborhood Z, where debates emerged about using the community farm after co-production. The debates were triggered by “rising demands for parking spaces,” as one community worker contends, “which are difficult to meet because there are also competing demands for green spaces and urban

farming” (a social worker interviewed, 7 April 2022). The contestation opened new spaces for antagonism, particularly after a lock was added to the community farm to prevent vegetables from being stolen. The contestation moved beyond modifications to the state’s regeneration plans and challenged the very framework of how participatory regeneration worked and how the community farm came into place. In the view of dissenters, building a community farm in an affordable housing estate lacking basic facilities such as parking spaces was too “simple and naive”. It was organized in a “let them eat cake” attitude”, as one resident explained, since such a project “doesn’t address our most pressing needs” (a local resident interviewed, 26 May 2023). What was achieved in participatory regeneration, as she indicated, was a semi-private arrangement for community public space favoring few residents, which was beyond what was predicated by property rights. This was demonstrated by another resident who questioned the community farm’s legitimacy. He insisted that “it does not matter as a farm ... (what matters) is the (regeneration) plan has not been approved by *all* homeowners through the homeowner’s assembly” (a local resident interviewed, 25 April 2022).

The contestations over community public spaces raised broader concerns over participatory regeneration in Qinghe, specifically in a form that was initiated by the state, guided by experts and attended by volunteers but lacking the “buy-in” from the wider community (Drake, 2014). As admitted by the community planner who designed the garden, “we need more intrinsic motivations from residents, not efforts from designers that sometimes don’t pay off” (a community planner interviewed, 13 June 2023).

Struggles over subjectivity: beyond volunteerism

Further questions were raised about whether participatory regeneration can cultivate self-governing subjects as intended. In Neighborhood M, the deterioration of the community garden reflects the wane of community volunteering. Such changes were described as follows.

The volunteers have remained enthusiastic for about half a year. Later they might feel tired and boring to do daily maintenance jobs, such as watering, because there was nothing like an incentive system ... The team dissolved the following spring, and no one ever cared about the community garden. (A community planner interviewed, 23 April 2022).

The decline of volunteerism is not only caused by problems in volunteer management, but also associated with fundamental tensions between volunteer subjectivity as an actually existing neoliberal subjectivity and the post-socialist context it played against. According to our interviews, motivations to participate originated less from calls for volunteering or a commitment to the community, but more from personal reasons, such as “enjoying gardening/farming”, “having fun”, or a general expression of kindness, such as “lending a helping hand to neighbours” (volunteers interviewed, 26 May 2023). As a consequence, the decline of volunteerism seemed inevitable, as one volunteer expressed, “we can participate once or twice for neighbourhood clean-ups, but no one can do it every day” (a volunteer interviewed, 16 May 2023). Further interviews suggest that volunteers lack the psychological ownership of community spaces, preventing them from developing into “responsible communities” that pursue self-management and self-fulfilment. They normally view garden maintenance, according to a community

planner, as “a kind of “voluntary job” to help *others*’, but “not for *themselves*, for *their* garden” (a community planner interviewed, 23 April 2022). She further explained, “this is because the government fully funded the project and implemented it primarily through us [community planners] ... the residents do not think it is *their* responsibility”. It is thus not surprising that a resident interviewed expressed his strong will that the state would take charge of the community garden through a professional team or the Residents’ Committee and “remove all overgrown brambles’ (a local resident interviewed, 24 April 2022). Similar views were held by quite a few residents in Neighborhood M, whose reliance on the local state was strengthened when community participation remained stagnant.

The call for a return of an interventionist state reflects the persistence of the socialist mentality in Neighborhood M. Introducing volunteerism and self-management ethos clashed with the legacies of the socialist governmentality in this privatized work unit. Residents developed their own ways to adapt to political programs that aimed to render them actionable and responsible. Some residents would rather wait for government help than be mobilized to help themselves, demonstrating their “organised dependency” on the state (Walder, 1986, p. 8). Others blamed the state for what they perceived as “a poorly designed and implemented project”, with a few stating that they “lost confidence” and retained from participating further (volunteers interviewed, 28 May 2023). Through non-participation, they escaped from responsibilities delegated by the state and refused to self-manage the community garden. Such a form of passive subject deactivated any governmental technologies that worked through the “responsible self” and reshaped community physical landscapes.

Apart from passive subjects, we observed a rise of active subjects in Neighborhood Z. The making of the community farm reactivated self-responsibility and self-governance among some, if not all, residents. However, this was not in line with the way prescribed by the state; these residents did not volunteer to self-manage the community farm but claimed their right to the farm as a collective property. As the interviews suggest, debates over the community farm were initially addressed within the defined neighborhood governance arrangements (e.g. the DC), but a consensus was almost impossible to reach among different voices from residents. This triggered an active form of resistance to the state-led micro-regeneration project. The opponents shifted to arenas outside the community to articulate their demands. A few turned to the 12345 public service hotline, filling their complaints and requesting interventions from higher levels of government. This appeared to be effective since complaint management has been promoted as one of the key criteria for evaluating the performance of local political leaders. Constant pressure from the “dissenters’ finally resulted in the termination of micro-regeneration in Neighborhood Z. By the time we returned to the farm in spring of 2023, all gardening work had come to a halt and the land had been left abandoned. The priority of local state agencies, as explained by one social worker interviewed, “is not participation, but lies in not to escalate the conflict further” (a social worker interviewed, 22 May 2023).

As a consequence, the community farm is no longer a “showcase project” of participatory micro-regeneration. Instead, it has been transformed into a politicized space that embodies competing interests, especially those diverted from state intentions. Rather than “proactive citizens,” these “dissenters’ were mostly “reactive citizens’ whose active subjectivity was ignited by the micro-regeneration project. Their new subject position

emerged from resistance towards state programs and bears some similarities to the “activist subjectivity” that challenges hegemonic imaginaries of the community public space (Bach & McClintock, 2021; Barron, 2017).

However, the new subjectivity is more civic-oriented rather than politically progressive, since it “both resist and comply with what may be perceived to be top-down forms of rule” (Roy, 2009, p. 160). By building their claims on property rights, the dissenters advocated for a more inclusive form of governmentality that encompasses “*all* homeowners” (a local resident interviewed, 25 April 2022) rather than active residents and volunteers who directly participate in place-making. This claim entrenches, rather than subverts, the fundamental market principles of neoliberal governmentality. In the meantime, their subjectivity was articulated through navigating the complaint management system of the state. It challenged local state agencies and their strategic intentions of social governance innovation, but consolidated the role of the state on a macro level (Tomba, 2014).

In sum, the post-regeneration predicament demonstrates that residents were “reflexive subjects” with the potential to internalize, adapt, alter, challenge or resist top-down endeavors which sought to introduce innovative governmental techniques containing elements of neoliberal governmentality. The predicament also reflects tensions between different modes of governmentalities at play, particularly tensions between the neoliberal “responsible self” and the lingering impact of their socialist or authoritarian predecessors. Spatial changes brought by participatory regeneration were heterogeneously inscribed into local social dynamics, shaping physical landscapes as well as community subjectivities in the long term.

Conclusion and discussion

To explore China’s recent transition from “growth-oriented” to “people-centered” urban (re)development, we examine a recent governance experiment in Qinghe, Beijing, especially the sub-experiment in participatory micro-regeneration. We investigate how participatory micro-regeneration plays out on the ground through the lens of governmentality. We focus particularly on the mutually constitutive relationship between changes in an urban landscape and changes in community subjectivities during and after the experiment.

In doing so, we attempt to theorize new practices of participatory micro-regeneration as exemplified in Qinghe. Through critically reflecting on the actual processes of participation, we argue that a new model of urban redevelopment is in the making. Unlike previous models of urban redevelopment, some of which tentatively incorporate participatory elements in decision-making (X. Li et al., 2020; Wei, 2022; Wong et al., 2021; Xu & Lin, 2019), Qinghe’s micro-regeneration has the concept of “participation” runs through from beginning to end. It features co-design, co-production, and self-management, which, in its ideal form, is attended by residents, guided by experts, and supported by the local state. There is no involvement from market actors or social investors, preventing participation from being enmeshed into the “market-oriented” order (c.f. Y. Liu & Yau, 2020).

Despite normative values portrayed by official documents and media, participation in micro-regeneration has to be understood as a part of Qinghe’s governance experiment that was initiated in response to “people-centred development” as a national political

mandate. Our grounded observation suggests that participation in the production and management of community public space did not emerge from bottom-up attempts but was mobilized by experts within the fields structured by the state for extra-economic objectives. Its close association with national political mandates and local state's attempts to crystalize such mandates through "technologies of expertise" distinguish participation in micro-regeneration from other forms of community participation, such as participation in neighborhood organizations (Cai & He, 2022; Fu & Lin, 2014) or collective actions (Yip, 2019). Therefore, new practices of participatory micro-regeneration not only symbolize a new paradigm of urban regeneration in China, but also shed light on possible new directions of community governance that move towards state-sponsored technocratic governance.

Furthermore, Qinghe's micro-regeneration shows how participation was instrumentalized by the state as an innovative toolkit to pursue new governance agendas. These experimental actions reflect the rise of a broadly defined "entrepreneurial state" (Lauer-mann, 2018). The primary purpose of instrumentalization was neither social control or social mobilization (thus differing from a traditional authoritarian or socialist state) nor outsourcing state responsibilities to communities and individuals (thus departing from a typical neoliberal state), but to experiment with new governance practices that materialize state's strategic goals of "co-production (*gongjian*)" and "co-governance (*gongzhi*)" (Xi, 2017). In this sense, the emphasis on participation and volunteerism in Qinghe's micro-regeneration does not necessarily represent new openings for community power (Cao, 2022; Read, 2003; Verdini, 2015). It is an innovative governmental technique deployed by the state to guide individual behaviors and manage the rapidly changing society in the new developmental stage.

Our analysis also offers an opportunity to revisit state-centered theories of urbanism, especially in the Chinese context where there is an ongoing trend toward "people-centered development". The latest research has begun to explore variegated manifestations of this transition, showing how the state promotes urban redevelopment for strategic goals beyond growth (Y. Li & Zhong, 2021; Z. Li, 2022; M. Wang et al., 2022a; Wu et al., 2022). Building on and expanding these observations, we have seen from Qinghe that strategic goals could fail. We highlight tensions, contradictions and resistance that prevent state programs from achieving intended goals. The tensions could arise from conflicts between neoliberal governmentality and the lingering impact of socialist governmentality, as demonstrated by non-participation in the community garden. They could also stem from tensions between state dominance and (demands for) self-governance, as well as between individualized neoliberal governmentality and a more inclusive form of governmentality, as shown in the resistance against the community farm. In this sense, the case of Qinghe suggests that the interrelationship between neoliberal governmentality and other modes of governmentality is close to a zero-sum one. Urban communities have become new "contact points" where different forms of reasoning and technologies of power meet and interact, competing for a dominant position to shape people's minds and behaviors. Future attempts to experiment with new governmental technologies – neoliberal or not – would involve negotiations with constellations of power relations that have long existed in the neighborhoods. Highlighting the complex and subtle power dynamics, we point out multiple possible ways in which the Chinese state interacts with its people, which are contingent products of its socialist

past, the rise of a market society (particularly rising awareness of property rights), and the introduction of a new state program that deploys actually existing neoliberal governmental technologies. We thus echo Rosol (2019) and call for “an analytical rather than a normative approach towards questions of participation” (p. 559) that recognizes geographical specificity and historical contingencies.

Notes

1. Due to ethical considerations, names of sampled neighborhoods are replaced with pseudonyms.
2. https://k.sina.com.cn/article_6470477109_181aba53502001gkkg.html?from=local
3. <https://iflaapr.org/2020-aapme-awards-announcement>

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Research ethics and consent

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University College London Research Ethics Committee (no. 5132/001). Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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